

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

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Go for a different look with ferns and ornamental grasses

While flowering annuals and perennials may be what most people want in their landscape, many are looking for different and unusual plants. Maybe you have a shady, moist area. Ferns love these conditions. Do you want a quick visual barrier, something to mix in a perennial bed or shrub border? How about a clump of vertical accent plants or something for some winter interest?

Ornamental grasses might be just what you're looking for.

Ferns are some of the most primitive and oldest plants on earth, having existed for over 300 million years. They don't produce flowers and they reproduce from spores rather than seeds. In the spring you will see their new fiddleheads peeking through the moist, humusy, acid soil in the woods. In the home garden it is important to mimic these natural conditions if possible. Amend your soil with compost or peat moss and plant ferns in shady areas. Be sure to keep the soil moist as they will turn brown and ugly in dry conditions.

Ferns can be very useful plants in the perennial garden. Their distinct foliage mixes beautifully with contrasting plants. Tall growing ferns like the ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*) make a handsome, dark green background for lower growers in front. In a spring bulb bed, ferns uncoil their fronds just in time to cover and blend with fading flowers and foliage. Flowering spring perennials such as Virginia bluebell (*Mertensia virginica*), bleeding heart (*Dicentra spectabilis*), columbine (*Aquilegia* species), candytuft (*Iberis sempervirens*) and coral bells (*Heuchera sanguinea*) can be planted with ferns to great effect.

While not all ferns thrive everywhere in Virginia, some favorite, hardy varieties include: the maidenhair fern (*Adiantum pedatum*), a beautiful, early fern that has light green fronds with a dark midrib and grows one and a half to two feet tall; the deer fern (*Blechnum spicant*), a hardy evergreen fern with dark glossy fronds six to eight inches high; the Japanese painted fern (*Athyrium nipponicum*), with graceful, sweeping gray-green fronds colored frosted silver and accented with red stems; the variegated holly fern (*Arachniodes simplicior*), with its erect fronds to 16 inches high and a distinct yellow-green band running down the center of each frond; and the aforementioned ostrich fern, with its five foot tall lacy fronds. As the popularity of ferns grows, so does the selection. While spring is the best time to shop for ferns, check with local nurseries for these and more varieties any time.

Ornamental grasses are enormously popular and with very good reason. They grow fast, make great accent plants, can be divided, require little care, are non-invasive (most grow from clumps, but check before planting) and they provide year-round interest.

You can plant grasses now as many of them won't form their seed heads until later in the summer and fall is when they reach their peak. In fall the Japanese blood grass (*Imperata cylindrica*) is at its finest, turning a deep blood red. It is also when the yellow and green striped leaves of the golden variegated hakonechloa (*Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola') displays its fall colors. The popular *Miscanthus* and *Pennisetum* grasses come into flower and produce their beautiful plumage in early fall.

Most of these beauties hold their foliage and seed heads into the winter, turning various shades of russet, tan or gold. The wind blowing through these is a beautiful sound, evocative of the Great Plains and the sand dunes on the Atlantic coast.

Ranging in size from the short, spiky blue fescue (*Festuca ovina* 'Glaucia') at about six inches to the giant reed grass (*Arundo donax*), ravenna grass (*Erianthus ravennae*) and pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*) at 15 to 20 feet, these grasses come in a lot of sizes. In between are the maiden grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gracillimus') at four to six feet and the incredible striped zebra grass (*M. sinensis* 'Zebrinus') at six to eight feet. While the dark green leaves of the rose fountain grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*) are beautiful in the summer, in the fall the rose-colored flower heads arch over for a stunning display. Get a beach feel by planting northern sea oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) for their tall spikes of flowers resembling oats on two to five foot tall plants.

Most of these grasses are perennial although some, like the 18 inch goldentop (*Lamarckia aurea*) and the two to three foot feathertop (*Pennisetum villosum*) are planted as annuals from seed. They can be sown right into prepared soil in the spring.

Many local nurseries sell these grasses. They can be planted from spring until early fall, so now is a perfect time. Care is minimal, just water regularly after planting. Once established, they require little watering. Just before spring growth starts it is best to cut back the dead foliage close to ground level. If you want new clumps, spring is also the time to divide them. Just dig up the whole clump and cut or tear them apart. This also helps to rejuvenate the clumps that may die back in the center. Water well and you are on your way again.

Virginia Gardening with Jim May is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services